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HISTORIC SPOTS IN WISCONSIN

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X. THE LOST VILLAGE OF THE MASCOUTEN

Scattered like dust and leaves, when the mighty blasts of October
Seize them, and whirl them aloft, and sprinkle them o'er the ocean,
Naught but tradition remains of the beautiful village of Grand Pré.
—*Longfellow.*

Perhaps no historic location in Wisconsin has been the subject of so much speculation and doubt as has the early "Mascouten village," so frequently mentioned in the annals of the French explorers and missionaries. Antiquarians and students of Wisconsin history, adducing arguments that seemed to them logical and conclusive, have located the long-lost village site at several different points along the upper Fox River. Due to apparent discrepancies in the original records, these theoretical "sites" extend from a few miles southwest of Omro to a few miles northeast of Portage, and involve three present-day counties—Winnebago, Green Lake, and Columbia—the great weight of authority indicating that the village was located within the present limits of Green Lake County.¹

If one can credit the estimate of the population made by Dablon, the Mascouten village was the largest community, savage or civilized, that ever resided together within Green Lake County. This missionary, who spent considerable time in the village, reported to his provincial in 1675 that the population had increased to over twenty thousand souls, and that Father Allouez could no longer minister unassisted to so large a parish. Antoine Silvy is mentioned as the missionary assistant who was assigned to the Mascouten village, or the Mission of St. Jacques, as the reed chapel was styled by the French. Several years earlier Dablon had

¹ *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xvi, 42, note; and articles in *Wis. Hist. Soc. Proceedings*, 1906, 167-182.

reported the village as having three thousand people, and he explained in the later report that the great increase in population was due to the arrival of refugees from other tribes.

As regards the site of this aboriginal village, some facts are definitely stated in the *Jesuit Relations* that help to approximate the location. Allouez says distinctly that the community was a day's journey from the confluence of the Fox and Wolf rivers, and to support this statement we have the map of Marquette, accompanying his *Journal* of 1673, and the map of the Lake Superior region with the *Relation* of 1670-71, both of which locate the village near the present city of Berlin. It is stated also that the bank of the river where the missionaries left their canoes was hard, not marshy, and that they proceeded across a prairie to the village which was on an elevation about two miles south of the river. Again, we read in the *Relations* that the surrounding country was a fertile prairie region, relieved by slight elevations, and not forested except for scattered groves of elm and oak on the higher grounds.

The unfortunate discrepancy that has caused so much misunderstanding about this location is the single statement of Marquette, wholly at variance with his map, that the Mascouten village was only three leagues from the portage of the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, and it is more than probable that this is due to a mistake in copying the journal. Very likely the missionary-explorer originally entered in his journal "thirty leagues" rather than "three leagues." As the river distance from the portage to Berlin is about eighty-five miles, this explanation would harmonize the statements of Allouez and Marquette, and agree substantially with the maps before mentioned.

For some reason or other, perhaps because of its unusual size, the Mascouten village attracted to a marked degree the attention of all early explorers and missionaries. The

Jesuit Relations and other annals of the period tell us much of the village and its people. It was a cosmopolitan community, inhabited by several different tribes at the same time, and in times of stress it seems to have been a "city of refuge" for even distant tribesmen. The cabins were built of woven reeds, the village was well fortified by palisades, and because of its large population it was necessarily of considerable extent.

Allouez first came to the village in 1670 as an itinerant missionary, and he established there in 1672 the Mission of St. Jacques. Dablon was with Allouez at this mission a part of the time. Father Marquette and his companion, Jolliet, were at this village for three days in 1673. Hennepin saw the Mascouten community in 1680, as did Le Sueur in 1683, Nicolas Perrot in 1685, and Lahontan in 1689.

Dablon and Allouez have given us in the *Jesuit Relations* a detailed account of the village, its people, and the country surrounding it. Following are extracts from the letter of Father Allouez to the Reverend Father Superior: "On the twenty-ninth [of April, 1670] we entered the river that leads up to the Maskoutench, called 'Fire Nation' by the Hurons. This river is very beautiful, without rapids or portages; its direction is southwest. The thirtieth, having disembarked opposite the village and left our canoe at the water's edge, after a walk of a league over beautiful prairies, we perceived the fort. The savages having discovered us, made first a cry in their village; they ran to us, accompanied us with honor to the cabin of the chief, where first they brought us refreshments and greased the feet and legs of the Frenchmen who were with me; afterward they prepared a feast. . . . In the evening I assembled them and made them a present of cloth, knives, and hatchets, to let them know the Black Robe. 'I am not the Manitou who is Master of your lives, who has created the heavens and the earth; I am His creature, I obey Him and carry

His work over all the lands.' I explained to them afterwards the articles of our holy faith, and the commandments of God; these good people only half understood me. . . . The savages named Oumami [Miami] are here only in small number; the greater part have not arrived from their hunt, so that I say nothing of them particularly. Their language is conformable to their temper; they are mild, affable, grave; also they speak slowly. . . . These people are established in a very fine place, where we see beautiful plains and level country as far as the eye reaches. Their river leads to a great river called Messisipi; there is a navigation of only six days; along this river are numerous other nations. . . . The kindnesses they did me occupied me almost all the day. They called at my lodge to see me, took me home with them, and after seating me on some beautiful skin, they presented me with a handful of tobacco which they placed at my feet. Then they brought me a kettle full of fat meat and Indian corn, with a speech of compliment which they made me. I have always taken occasion from this to inform them of the truth of our faith. God has given me the grace to be always understood, their language being the same as that of the Saki. . . . This people appeared very docile.

"Here is a mission all ready, composed of two nations dwelling together, capable of fully occupying a missionary."²

In the *Relation* of 1670-71 Father Claude Dablon in his report to Rev. P. J. Pinette, Provincial, makes further mention of the Mascouten village. After a description of the difficult passage up the rapids of the lower Fox, he describes the country of the Mascouten as follows:

"After one has passed these ways, equally rough and dangerous, as a recompense for all these difficulties which

² R. G. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland, 1896-1903), liv, 227-233; Louise P. Kellogg, *Early Narratives of the Northwest* (New York, 1917), 155-158.

one has overcome, we enter into the most beautiful country that can ever be seen; prairies on all sides as far as the eye can reach, divided by a river which gently winds through them, and on which to float by rowing is to repose one's self. When we have arrived at this place, we have passed the forests and the hills; there are only small elevations here and there, covered with groves, as if to offer their shade to the traveler that he may refresh himself from the heat of the sun.

"Here are seen only elms, oaks, and other trees of like nature, not like those ordinarily found on bad lands which are merely fit to cover cabins with their bark, or to make canoes. For this reason these people know not what it is to go on water, and have no other houses, for the most part, than those made of rushes bound together in the form of mats. . . .

"This is all a prairie country . . . which richly feeds wild cows that one meets with pretty often in droves of four or five hundred beasts, readily furnishing by their number, food for entire villages who for that reason are not obliged to separate by families during the hunting season, as the savages of other countries do.

"It is also among these rich pastures where are found buffaloes . . . which much resemble our bulls in size and strength. . . . Their flesh is excellent, and its fat mixed with the wild oats makes the most delicate dish in this country. . . .

"It is necessary to proceed more than twenty leagues in this beautiful country before we arrive at the 'Fire Nation,' which is situated on a little rising ground, from whence nothing but vast prairies are seen on all sides with some groves in various parts, and which nature seems to have produced only for the delight of the eyes or for the necessities of man, who cannot do without wood. Here we arrived on the 13th of September, 1670, and were received by the concourse of the whole people. . . .

"The 'Fire Nation' bears this name erroneously, calling themselves Maskoutench, which signifies 'a land bare of trees' such as that which these people inhabit. . . . It [the Mascouten community] is joined in the circle of the same barriers to another people named Oumami, which is one of the Illinois nations that separated itself from the others in order to dwell in these quarters.

"They compose together more than three thousand souls, being able, each one, to furnish four hundred men to defend themselves against the Iroquois, who come even into these distant countries to seek them. . . ."³

Then follows a long description of the religious instruction given to the people of the village, and of their determination to build a reed chapel in which to establish a mission.

Father Dablon makes further reference to the Mascouten village in the *Relation* of 1671-72, from which we quote his reference to the work of Father Allouez as follows:

"He found in the village of the Maskoutench, which is the Fire Nation, three peoples of different languages; he was received there as an angel from heaven, particularly by those who, having recently arrived from the quarters of the south, had never had knowledge of any Frenchman. They could not satisfy themselves with gazing on him; the days were too short to hear him speak of our mysteries, and it was necessary thus to employ entire nights. So favorable a reception stayed the Father very willingly, and gave him the opportunity of baptising two sick persons. . . ."⁴

Dablon reported in 1675 that the Mascouten village had been increased to twenty thousand people by refugees from other tribes. In 1676 the report stated that of this large population, only thirty-six adults and one hundred twenty-six children had accepted Christian baptism.⁵ It would

³ *Jes. Rel.*, lv. 191-213.

⁴ *Ibid.*, lviii, 21-37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, lix, 225; lx, 207.

thus seem that the attitude of the community toward the new faith was one of tolerance rather than of conviction.

It is not known when or under what circumstances this notable village finally disappeared. As stated before, it had always been a haven for the distressed of different tribes. There are casual accounts in the later records that indicate a bond of sympathy between the Mascouten and the Fox Indians; and it is possible that during the long strife between the Fox tribes and the French, a conflict in which fire and sword were used indiscriminately, the Mascouten village may have been burned and its people driven away.

It is rather remarkable that no traces of this large and fairly well described aboriginal village have been discovered in modern times. It is clear that the Mascouten community was located on an eminence, that it was fortified by palisades, that it was about two miles (a "short league" as the *Relations* have it) south of the Fox River, that it was a day's journey from the junction of the Fox and Wolf rivers, and that an unforested prairie surrounded it on all sides. The two maps of the period, as well as most descriptions written by the early missionaries, fix the site between Berlin and Princeton, probably much nearer to the former city. During the long period of its occupancy by the savages, it would seem that refuse heaps must have accumulated in which were buried discarded weapons and implements, as well as the bones of animals used for food. An extensive burial ground must have developed in the immediate vicinity, and some of these evidences should persist to the present time, even though two and one-half centuries have elapsed since the planting of the Mission of St. Jacques. It is not impossible that, at some future time, excavation or accidental discovery may once more fix definitely the site of this long-lost village of the Mascouten. If so, it will become a hallowed shrine for the antiquarian and the historian—an "historic spot" indeed.